

SINGER-SONGWRITER JUDY FJELL  
PO Box 1616 Helena, MT 59624  
[judyfjell@mac.com](mailto:judyfjell@mac.com) [www.judyfjell.com](http://www.judyfjell.com)

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Dear Members of the House Judiciary Committee,

I was born and raised in Big Timber, Montana, and currently live in the city of Helena. I would like to express support for HB481 in protecting LGBT citizens against discrimination, particularly in the areas of housing, employment, and public accommodations.

In the early 70s I was terrified to come out as a lesbian because I was afraid of losing my family, my community, my church home, my job, and my financial well-being. These fears were not ungrounded at that time. I could indeed have lost it all. Also, because I had often been mistaken for a boy, my fears were not only about sexual preference, but also about society's lack of acceptance of my intergender identity.

Our society has progressed immeasurably since those days. And yet I know that in many ways it is just as difficult for youth to come to terms with sexual and gender identities now as it was when I was a teenager. Knowing this, I assert that it is crucially important for our institutions, such as the state of Montana, to offer assertive visible and public protection to all its citizens at every opportunity. Sexual and gender minorities are at high risk for suicide, bullying, beatings, rape, murder, depression, homelessness, and substance abuse, as we attempt to grow up and live true to ourselves, honestly and openly in our families and communities. Every affirmation by institutions such as state legislatures, schools, churches, civic organizations, and cities makes it easier to be ourselves. LGBT citizens deserve to live full, unhindered, productive lives just like any other citizen of Montana. Protection of all is good for the state of Montana.

HB481 will also save lives with its proclamation that all citizens, not just those who walk the straight and narrow, are valued. When we as a people say publicly that we value every citizen, it does not go unheard. Lonely, suicidal, closeted LGBT teens at our high schools, and marginalized adults in every small town and coulee of Montana will hear us. Those who threaten the lives of LGBT will hear us and know that it is not the will of the people of Montana to discriminate against any of our citizens or enforce that discrimination with unlawful, violent behavior. It is past time to affirm and celebrate the diversity of our citizens. Too many lives have already been lost due to society's irrational fears of sexual and gender minorities.

I urge you to move HB481 forward to help all our citizens to live in safety and without fear.

Sincerely,

Judy Fjell